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Anxiety of Influence: Reading Edith Wharton's the Age of Innocence and Henry James's the Portrait of a Lady

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Abstract:
Edith Wharton's literary relationship with Henry James has been a subject of much critical debate wherein Wharton is often positioned as James's devoted follower. This paper reflects upon this relationship by reading Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and examines how, while sharing various thematic interests, both the authors depart significantly in their aesthetic and social concerns. Wharton, undermined and trapped under James's shadow, diverges from James's psychological introspection of the self and interior lives of his characters. Her interests are centred on broader social contexts, critique of social convention, and gender hierarchies. The paper tries to assert her autonomy and show how her writing is distinct from James's, despite their similar literary preoccupations.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, Henry James, The Age of Innocence, The Portrait of a Lady, Narrative divergence, Literary Influence

In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill contended that women would face significant challenges in overcoming the male-dominated literary tradition to create original and independent art. He argued that women were "doomed to be imitators and never innovators" (qtd in Showalter 3). Early critical reception of Edith Wharton's work was heavily influenced by her association with Henry James. Since the publication of her first collection, *The Greater Inclination* (1899), Wharton was often described as "Mr. James's most faithful follower." Reviews from sources like the *Boston Congregationalist* and the *San Francisco Argonaut* echoed this sentiment, with critics noting that Wharton appeared to be "a faithful student of Henry James" (Springfield Republican), and that her work was "plainly modelled on the methods of Henry James" (Hereford Gazette) (Qtd in Bell, *Edith Wharton and Henry James* 217-18). Such comparisons persisted throughout Wharton's career, overshadowing her literary contributions. Although some of her early fiction drew from James's aesthetics, her later works diverged stylistically, marking a clear departure from his influence. Nevertheless, the accusations of zealous imitations persisted.

In her memoir *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton reflects on her friendship with Henry James, noting how his presence seemed to seamlessly integrate into her life. She writes, "As for the date of the meeting that brought us together, neither of us could ever recall when or where it happened. What we knew was that, suddenly, it felt as though we had always been friends, and would continue to be, as he wrote to me

in February 1910, 'more and more never apart.'" This passage captures the deep, effortless bond between them, illustrating the sense of enduring connection that characterized their relationship (173).

In Edith Wharton's literary career, the presence of Henry James proved to be a significant and distracting influence. The perception that she was merely his literary heiress deeply troubled her. In a letter to W.C. Brownell, she expressed her frustration, saying, "The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books in the last ten years I can't read, as much as I delight in the man) makes me rather hopeless" (qtd in Bell, *Introduction* 4). This sentiment underscores Wharton's struggle with the overshadowing comparison and her desire to establish her own distinctive voice.

Henry James and Edith Wharton shared a common desire to unravel and dissect the conventions of narrative fiction. Both sought to define principles governing the form of the novel, frequently exploring the social dynamics of their time: the contrast between European and American cultures, the old world and the new, and the tensions of class and manners. These concerns preoccupied them throughout their literary careers. Despite their shared interests, however, James and Wharton produced strikingly different kinds of fiction.

Thematically, Wharton was drawn to James's focus on the subtleties of moral consciousness, the struggle between art and life, and the clash between tradition and modernity. Yet, her approach to these themes diverged significantly from his. Where James adhered strictly to the "centre of consciousness"—his hallmark narrative technique—Wharton was more flexible, choosing points of view based on narrative convenience rather than principle. James was primarily invested in the intricacies of character, while Wharton emphasized the social "situation". Where James was fascinated by the mystery of the Mind, Wharton was focused on exposing the deceptions embedded in social conventions and manners.

In this essay, I will explore how James and Wharton addressed similar themes in divergent ways in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Age of Innocence* respectively, revealing the distinct artistic motivations that drove each writer.

The 'Old New York" was a part of both James's and Wharton's earliest associations, "that 'Old New York' whose focus lay between Washington Square, where he was born in 1843, and Twenty-Third Street, a mile further uptown where she was born nearly twenty years later" (Bell, *Edith Wharton and Henry James* 47). Both writers cherished a wistful affection for this world of which they were at once critical and nostalgic. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Wharton paid her tribute to the vanished glory of the Old New York of her childhood and went down in history to be the first woman to win the Pulitzer award. The book established her as "a writer to bring glory to America…" (Bell 5). It is interesting that it was James who had exhorted Wharton to recognise that the most appropriate subject for the exercise of her artistic talents was the American scene, especially New York. In a letter dated 26 October, 1900, he wrote: "I…egg you on in your study of the American Life that surrounds you… don't pass it by…the immediate, the real, the ours, the yours, the novelists that it waits for…do New York" (qtd in Edel 236-38).

In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton examines themes similar to those found in Henry James's work, particularly the contrasts between innocence and experience, and between Europe and America—central ideas that James explored most famously in *The Portrait of a Lady*. While James's novel follows an American woman grappling with the complexities of European society, *The Age of Innocence* centres on upper-class New York in the 1870s. Wharton is concerned with the American experience, vividly capturing New York's elite in all its opulence—lavish dinner parties, secret liaisons, marriages, gossip,

and intrigues. James, by contrast, focuses more on the psychological depths of his characters, tracing their inner moral and emotional journeys.

Wharton was critical of modern fiction's preoccupation with the subconscious. In her work, individual characters are deeply interconnected with the collective experience of their social world; their personal histories and thoughts are shaped by the dense web of societal norms and customs. As Knight explains, this is portrayed through "the welter of trifles, the matrix of social knowledge" (Knight 51). In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton skilfully merges the public and private spheres, presenting New York City's collective consciousness as inseparable from the lives of its residents.

James, in the preface to *The Portrait* says that "germ of my idea" consisted "not at all in any conceit of a 'plot'…but altogether in the curse of the single character and aspect of a particular engaging woman, to which all the usual elements of a 'subject', certainly a setting, were to need to be super-added" (42). James emphasises the centrality of the protagonist's inner life over a rigid plot structure. By focusing on the "germ" of his idea—a singular character with a rich, undefined potential—James creates a narrative that evolves around the heroine's personal growth and experiences. This trope allows the protagonist to shape the story through her perceptions and choices, giving her a dynamic role in defining the novel's direction rather than merely fitting into a predetermined plot.

Traditional readings of *The Portrait* have tended to see it as a drama of Innocence and Experience whereby America and Europe "stand as metonymic poles of the two ideas respectively (Porte 4). Isabel Archer is the quintessential Emersonian heroine, possessing a "certain nobleness of imagination…she spent half her time thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity. She had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of free expansion, of irresistible action" (James 104). Isabel Archer's journey in *The Portrait of a Lady* is a poignant examination of disillusionment. Her vibrant imagination and belief in boundless freedom make her particularly susceptible to the manipulative machinations of Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond. In Europe, Isabel's illusions of limitless independence and infinite choices are gradually dismantled. What she envisioned as a realm of unbounded possibility instead reveals itself as a trap of conventional constraints, and Isabel finds herself, as Ralph Touchett aptly describes, in the "very mill of the conventional".

Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady* embodies the remnants of a fading social order, navigating her existence through a cynical adaptation to conventional values. Her immersion in a world of appearances and deceit sharply contrasts with Isabel's initial innocence and idealism. As Isabel matures and confronts the harsh realities of life in Europe, she transitions into Experience. Meanwhile, Madame Merle, seasoned by her own disillusionments, attempts to recapture a sense of lost innocence by returning to America.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton offers a compelling reversal of Henry James's treatment of Innocence and Experience. Rather than depicting Innocence as a deeply individual quality produced by romanticism and idealism, Wharton presents it as a potent and entrenched force. May Welland exemplifies this form of Innocence. As Knight observes, "In New York's eyes, May is the nice girl, the Angel and Diana of the public sanctuary" (Knights 30). Yet, May's innocence is not born of naivety but is a carefully cultivated facade, deeply rooted in conventional social norms and etiquette. Archer contemplates whether May's face will "thicken with the same middle-aged image of invincible innocence," which could "seal the mind against imagination" (Wharton 92).

Both Isabel Archer and May Welland originate from 1870s America, but they embody very different ideals. Isabel, the "New Woman" (Moore 16), is influenced by Emersonian ideals of freedom, adventure,

and individualism. May is largely unaffected by these progressive values, remaining firmly within the bounds of traditional social structures. In Wharton's work Innocence is not an abstract, aesthetic quality but a powerful instrument that ensures social compliance.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer's journey concludes with her walking into darkness, betrayed and alone, resolutely rejecting all easy choices and confronting her destiny with defiance. In *The Age* May Welland remains "generous, faithful, and unwearied," yet is fundamentally incapable of growth or change. She dies "believing the world to be a fundamentally good place, filled with loving and harmonious households like her own" (Wharton 220).

In the novel's resolution, Innocence seems to prevail as May remains devoted to her husband despite his interest in another woman, supported by the entire New York upper-class community. Wharton's treatment of Innocence is steeped in irony. Unlike James, for whom Isabel's innocence represents a moral abstraction, Wharton exposes, with cynical sharpness, the conventional structures that construct "innocence" as a shield against transgressive structural disruptions. This ironic portrayal accentuates how societal norms use the facade of innocence to maintain order and stifle challenges to the status quo.

Ellen Olenska in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* superficially resembles Madame Merle in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Both characters carry the weight of their European experiences, which lend them an aura of mystery and sensuality. However, their respective responses to their pasts and their approaches to their societies are widely divergent. Madame Merle, shaped by her European background, becomes wearied and manipulative. In contrast, Ellen, despite her reckless past and prolonged stay in decadent Europe, is innocently resilient, believing that she could make a fresh start in America. She articulates her desire to move beyond her past with the statement, "I want to be free; I want to wipe out all the past" (Wharton 70). This longing for renewal parallels Isabel Archer's pursuit of self-discovery and enrichment in Europe. While Isabel's moral fortitude allows her to confront the consequences of her choices with integrity, Ellen's ethics precludes her from shattering the lives of those who had shown her kindness. James's examination of Innocence and Experience is primarily a psychological and conceptual inquiry, delving into the inner lives of his characters. Conversely, Wharton's exploration of these themes is more focused on their manifestation as social categories, illustrating how they are influenced by and perpetuate convention and class/gender hierarchies.

James frames the question of a woman's predicament through her internal moral conflicts.

Isabel Archer's struggles are not representative of the typical experiences of women in her social class; rather, her exceptional situation serves as a vehicle for James to explore the ideals of personal freedom. James constructs Isabel's subjectivity outside of events and relationships that are presumed to shape it. James's was seen as the master of granular representations of individual persons and rich interiorisation. In contrast to Isabel, Henrietta Stackpole, a type of "New Woman" in *The Portrait of a Lady*, is depicted with a more external and overtly assertive demeanour, rendering her a somewhat farcical figure in James's narrative. James's attitude to the new professional woman reflects his complex and rather conservative attitude to gender. Yet, it is Henrietta who challenges gender expectations with her vivacity, her penchant for argumentation, her assertion of economic independence, and her defiance of traditional femininity. However, James's aesthetic interests in theatre, art, and narrative form find their full expression in Isabel's character and consciousness. In "Eyeing the Beholder: Henry James's Immaterial Portrait of a Lady", Miciah Hussey avers, -"positioning Isabel as a subject squarely in the teeth of the aesthetic structures of vision and narration, these structures produce a tension between interior experience and exterior social forces (especially class and gender) that seek to frame her as an object,

both a portrait and "a Lady" (176). So, despite his apparent disinterest in the social or contextual, James's text is unable to avoid the tension between history and aesthetics, the internal and the external.

A substantial body of critical reading of *The Age of Innocence* argues that the novel is the most Jamesian of Wharton's writing. Yet, despite the similarities of style and echoes of James's preoccupations, Wharton's interest lies in unravelling the conditions of women's constricted and socially restrictive choices. Perhaps her own experiences as a woman from the upper class made her more keenly aware of the social constraints women have to negotiate with. Wharton was writing at a time when the American literary scene was dominated by male writers. Her own place in the American literary canon was hard-won. Most of the early evaluations of her works were invariably compared to James's writing, and not always to her advantage. It was only after the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 that she was given her due place in the American literary world. In her memoir *A Backward Glance* she writes with regret : " My literary success puzzled and embarrassed my old friends far more than it impressed them, and it created a constraint which increased with years" (qtd in Ozick 73). But with time, she says, she " no longer cared, for my recognitions as a writer had transformed my life" (Qtd in Ozick 73). And yet, in her journey from obscurity to fame she received the most enduring support from none other than Henry James.

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